

The Best Worst Case Scenario

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A plate of brownies makes its way around the circle as we discuss the potential destruction. I'm still not clear on what to do when the shaking begins; our circle times have consisted of talking prep---water storage, canned foods, first aid kits. We have also imagined post-quake damage. How to locate and get our children home, where our gas shutoffs are, and how we will contact the outside world from within the rubble, have been covered.

I don't want to frighten anyone with my concern. We are here to talk solutions. We are trying to imagine the best of a worst-case scenario, though for me surviving the earthquake is itself the best thing that can happen. What occurs after will be a series of obstacles relatively negotiable among people, which however unreasonable we can be, is a situation where language and empathy are at least an option. The indifferent pummeling that will occur when a tectonic plate slides under our continent, shifting the geography of the northwest, is what frightens me.

I grew up in northern Illinois, where the big natural threat was tornadoes. Every week in my hometown an alarm on a nearby water tower sounded, both an eerie but innocently reassuring reminder that an elaborate security system was in place. Atmospheric behavior, measurable with tools that got more sophisticated by the year (as advertised by competing news stations) was something we could gauge in a way seismometers cannot. People watched the skies. We would have time.

As important, we knew once the funnel wove itself out of the clouds, where to go: underground. We had basements and cellars. We knew it was possible the wind could rip us right out of those shelters, could spit a grass blade through a fence post, but the forewarning and clear direction for when the event began, gave me a *sense* of safety I feel lacking in Oregon.

"Does anyone know what to do when it actually starts?" I ask. "I've heard we're supposed to stay put, but I've also heard to get outside."

"Depends on where you are," our host says.

She says that she intends on exiting the building her and I teach in downtown, an old stone structure she does not trust. Another group member tells us she knew someone who got up from his desk when the plane hit the first tower, walked down the stairs and out of the building before it fell.

These sorts of side stories are common to our prep meetings; of the two Anna and I have attended, I have gleaned bits of disaster stories--- an older man had been shaken out of bed in a California quake; the host had family displaced by Katrina; a guy about my age had been in a highway accident.

Perhaps we offer these scary tales to console. There is not a vibe of one-upmanship, but semi-pragmatic lessons, though I think much of it is for the sake of expressing camaraderie for having survived something. See, we are still here. We can do it again. I have had a couple close calls, though I do not want to discuss these--- I still want a general agreement on what to do when it starts. It's not clear. Am I to check every building I enter for its seismic strength? Wouldn't that drive me crazy?

A husky-voiced woman picks up on my theme.

"I've wondered about trees," she says. "Like, are they just gonna fall down?"

"Some of the trees around here are really old," someone else says, not really offering an answer.

A general conversation starts, with side talks, the laptop circulating for those of us who did not enter our info into the Google sheet yet. The brownie plate is all crumbs.

The meeting winding down, we reconvene on the topic of retrofitting. One neighbor says her husband did the foundation bolting himself; another had an engineer make drawings before she chose a contractor. Others, like Anna and I, are renters, and so have to take it up with our landlords. Again, there is no agreement on best practices here.

What may be the oddest and to me counterintuitive suggestion arises from the guy who'd been in the bad highway accident.

"I've taught therapeutic yoga," he begins, and goes on to explain how our heart rates will speed up in the event of a crisis. "It's better to let your breathing intensify when this happens, than try and control it by slowing your breaths down," he says.

This quiets the group. Both he and his girlfriend had recently moved onto our street. They were not at the first two meetings, and now he has arrived with his carnage stories and dubious medical advice; staying hyper in the event of an emergency seems the last thing one should do.

As I consider vocalizing my doubt, a rumble from the second floor causes everyone to look up. The host's daughters have run across the hardwood floor. We share uneasy smiles, acknowledge the meeting is adjourned, and get up to leave.

Had I shared my story, it would have been of the earthquake in Santiago, Chile. I would have said I was at the desk one weekday afternoon. Our apartment was on the 21st floor. To my right were the hazy Andes, the sliding balcony door open.

Someone dropped something very heavy a floor or two up. It was a wide object, a dresser or fridge, given how the vibrations seemed spread out rather than centralized. Then it occurred that one does not drop a fridge.

Plaster was trickling down behind the walls. I stood up. The dishes rattling in their rack was the movie clip sound that finally alerted me to what was happening. A few seconds later it was over.

I looked out, but did not step onto the balcony. A local had said the skyscrapers would bend like a field of daisies when bigger ones hit. This was apparently not a bigger one, as the skyline stayed still.

It was the total helplessness I felt, regardless of the magnitude, that I wanted to share at our prep meeting. I know this is my thing to deal with. I have read of others that have left town due to misinformation (a tsunami will not wash Portland away) which we do not intend on doing. I met a

lifelong Oregonian who laughed when I told him about our meetings; he too seemed to be misinformed, denying a scientifically proven potential. I heard someone at a business conference tell the room that she too has started quake prep meetings, which have been a great chance for her to promote rain barrels. Too scared, not scared enough, or using the fear for political purposes. Where are the knowing ones here?

What I as a midwesterner living near a subduction zone needs to get cool with is the ubiquity of the event: an earthquake, unlike a tornado, will be everywhere. Websites agree that it is best to stay indoors when it begins, though from there the mixed messages begin. One is to either get under or hold onto a desk, stand against a wall, or in a doorframe. It is not clear which is preferred. It is agreed to stay away from the kitchen, but what if you are eating? Should you get under the table, or run to a desk?

As for outdoors, it seems unless you're somehow in a flat empty field, you're in trouble. Power lines, trees and windows are some pieces of the sky that will fall. Whole buildings and bridges will follow--- we know this. We've read the New Yorker story, and the responses, including this one.

So. Better to be prepared than paranoid is one thing I hear, and agree with. In Rainier earlier this week Anna and I were silenced by the snow-dusted trees carpeting the mountainside. The weather was moving fast, our winter wonderland fading in and out with clouds rushing up the valley. This is why we live here, receiving spiritual nourishment from the same peaks and valleys that could shift and destroy us with what on a geologic scale is just a hiccup. Part of my preparing, then, has been to make peace with the smallness of humans, with the price of living in stunning but existentially costly natural beauty, feelings that ironically have no place at earthquake preparation meetings.